

Linking Computers and Community Organizations in Senegal

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How can community organizations successfully exploit the new information and communication technologies (ICTs)? That is the issue confronting Rabia Abdelkrim Chikh, an anthropologist and researcher with Enda Ecopole in Senegal. As leader of a project that aims to demystify computers for young people in some of the most crowded neighbourhoods of Dakar and its outskirts, and make them a commonplace work tool, she has had some success.

Piloted by the NGO Enda Ecopole and aimed at "the appropriation and exploitation of the new ICTs by community organizations in Senegal," the project has been favourably received by the neighbourhood youngsters.

For Fatou Seye, a manager at the Centre de Ressources Communautaires (a community resource centre) in the Khadimou Rassoul sector, the project has helped to demystify computers. It is a forward-looking project, and computers are much sought-after in Senegal, even in the most impoverished communities. A young woman who worked for an association before joining the project, Fatou points out that "computers enable people to store lots of information, and to respond to numerous requests from local people, who are mostly garage owners or shopkeepers. We aren't always able to accommodate clients who want specifications, invoices, business cards and so on." Managers at the Médina site, in the Blaise Senghor Cultural Centre, tell the same story of unfulfilled demand, because of shortages of supplies and the lack of equipment that is essential to the development of the community resource centres — things like scanners and photocopiers.

Underlying philosophy

Ms Chikh sees this project — based on experimentation with members of community organizations — as consistent with the Enda Ecopole philosophy, whereby "sustainable development can take place provided that alternative local economic practices are exploited and reinforced." The local economy, unlike the informal sector, is an employment generator. What needs to be done is to train the human resources in impoverished communities and set up a system of collective management.

For this project, eight sites were selected in the most impoverished neighbourhoods of Dakar and its outskirts: Médina, Khadimou Rassoul, El Baraka, Colobane, Yarakh, Pikine, Yeumbeul, and Rufisque. Each site is equipped with a community resource centre that includes a telecentre and a computer setup for word processing, designing business cards, printing invitations, pressing books, and generating invoices, specifications and so on.

Site managers

Each site is run by two local young people, who are selected and trained in computer operation. They thus create their own jobs, and they take turns training other young people while keeping an eye on the management of the telecentre activities and which computer services are in demand. In the view of Moustapha Ndiol and Awa Cheikh Ba, the managers of the Médina centre, "the project

is very valuable from the training point of view, but there are problems in the area of financial management: the community approach discourages capital inputs, and the lack of equipment is crippling, too." Yet the young people in Médina and Khadimou Rassoul realize that "startups are always difficult," and they trust that their patience and perseverance will be rewarded one day.

The project's technical director, Modou Diouf, who has responsibility for management and training, notes that of the eight sites, seven are already operational and connected to the Internet. "The young managers catch on quickly to the use of computers, and they very rarely call on their trainers for help," he says. The modules are well designed and the young people are quite capable of training other young people.

Field testing

Where management training is concerned, field testing is under way with a view to making improvements. This action-research and training pilot project shows that these communication tools can be useful to community groups, and that it is time for development partners to help them acquire more equipment. Given the community approach, and the fact that the target communities are poor, the fees for services are too low to ensure rapid cost recovery, but solutions could be found through other sources of funding.

In Diouf's view, "computers and the Internet are not frills for the underprivileged, and we have to go with the flow in this age of globalization and interconnection of all economies."

Community involvement

Project leader Chikh says she is delighted by the level of involvement and interest in the project. Community leaders, religious authorities, women — everyone is pitching in to give the young people a brighter future. In every neighbourhood, space has been found for the community resource centres, and the selection of managers from among the youth of each community was well received. An approach based on the creation of self-employment, validation of existing local capabilities, improved social organization — these are all values that must be preserved in order to generate resources and ensure that the local economy makes a genuine contribution to the reduction, if not the elimination, of poverty.

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